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# Play Uses 'Butterfly' As Subtext

By IRVIN MOLOTSKY

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 24 — John Dexter has directed many plays and operas but never Puccini's "Madama Butterfly."

"I thought it was so racist that I couldn't face it," he said the other day during a break in rehearsals for a bizarre play that makes use of both the melodies and what Mr. Dexter considers the racism of "Madama Butterfly" as its subtext.

First, the plot, which came from a true story that was summarized in The New York Times on May 11, 1986, by the headline: "France Jails 2 in Odd Case of Espionage."

Odd indeed. A man who worked for the French foreign service had carried on a 20-year love affair with a soprano from the Beijing Opera, never discovering, he said, that the singer was a man. Moreover, the singer was a spy.

One thing led to another and the diplomat, Bernard Boursicot, found himself on trial in Paris on charges of spying, since he had been turning over secret information to his lover, Shi Peipu.

## 'For Me He Was Really a Woman'

At the trial, the judge asked Mr. Boursicot how he could have been so taken in for 20 years and the Frenchman answered, "I was shattered to learn that he is a man, but my conviction remains unshakable that for me at the time he was really a woman and was the first love of my life."

There are plenty of diplomats — French, Chinese and otherwise — in Washington, and, the record shows, an occasional spy. But no one can recall anything even remotely like that happening here.

Richard Helms, a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, amused by the story, asked, "Where was French counterintelligence?"

David Henry Hwang, the playwright, was also charmed, and it took him less than a year to write a play based on the story, called "M. Butterfly," which he took to Mr. Dexter last spring. Mr. Dexter agreed to direct the play, and it has had its pre-Broadway opening here at the National Theater, where it will play until March 6.

The play opens March 20 in New York City at the Eugene O'Neill Theater, a few days before a production of Berg's "Lulu," also directed by Mr. Dexter, opens at the Metropolitan Opera. After that, Mr. Dexter vows, "Opera is behind me," and he will devote his career to plays. For him, there will be a "M. Butterfly" but never a "Madama Butterfly."

## But Is It Believable?

But is this believable, a man not knowing that his lover of 20 years is also a man?

"I never had any problem with that," Mr. Dexter said. "A man in pursuit of his fantasies is capable of anything. If you permit yourself to believe badly enough, you see nothing that you don't want to see. It's all in the mind."

But really, a 20-year fantasy?

Mr. Dexter thought a bit, and said of the diplomat's refusal until the end to acknowledge that his lover was not a woman, "I am sure he knew but couldn't face it, so instead he went through an embarrassing trial."

It was nothing if not embarrassing. Before being sentenced to six years in jail, the French diplomat, Mr. Boursicot, suggested that his mistake was the result of his rendezvous with the singer, Mr. Shi, always having taken place in the dark.

"He was very shy," Mr. Boursicot testified. "I thought it was a Chinese custom."